

ELDER POSITION PAPER

CHURCH DISCIPLINE PROCESS

Introduction

On this side of eternity, believers struggle and war with their flesh. We also war with the powers arrayed against the kingdom of God. In this age of plurality with its moral ambiguity and loss of absolute truth, the Village Church of Barrington (VCB) believes it is critical to adhere to scripture's call on our lives. We accept our duty and obligation to the body and each other, to hold one another accountable in love. Discipline in a Christian's life primarily is done by God (Heb. 12:6) out of love and concern for His children. He does this to make His children into the image and likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, to make them ready for eternal life with the Godhead. How God disciplines is varied, but it occurs often in the Church Age by the loving concern of fellow Christians (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 2 Cor. 2:6). This is carried out under the principles of Matthew 18, and has the benefit of guarding the local and universal body of Christ, and keeping the individual members walking in the Spirit and not the flesh. In this policy paper, the guiding scriptural texts will be reviewed, the goals delineated, and the process of church discipline laid out for future generations of elders at VCB.

Guide and Goals

Our basis and pattern of discipline is the nature of God Himself (1 Pet. 1:16; Heb. 12:11). Our guide is the Word of God, the Bible (1 Cor. 5:1-13; Matt. 18:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:20; Gal. 6:1). Scripture teaches us that the purpose and goal of discipline is multiple: (1) To bring glory to God and enhance the testimony of the flock; (2) To restore, heal, and build up sinning believers (Matt. 18:15; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Heb. 12:10-13; Gal. 6:1-2; Jam. 5:20); (3) To produce a healthy faith, one sound in doctrine (Tit. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:19-20); (4) To win a soul to Christ, if the sinning person is only a professing Christian (2 Tim. 2:24-26); (5) To silence false teachers and their influence in the church (Tit. 1:10-11); (6) To set an example for the rest of the body and promote godly fear (1 Tim. 5:20); (7) To protect the church against the destructive consequences that occur when churches fail to carry out church discipline. A church that fails to exercise discipline experiences four losses. These are the loss of purity (1 Cor. 5:6-7), power (Joshua 7), progress (Revelation 2:5 and 3:16), and purpose (1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2:9-15).

Matters for Discipline

The stimulus for church discipline include the following:

1. Difficulties between members (Matt. 18:15-17).
2. Divisive or factious people causing divisions in the church (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11).

3. Immoral conduct; sins of the type mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 and Galatians 5:19-21 such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, or idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (1 Cor. 5:1, 11; 2 Thess. 3:10-15).
4. False teaching; erroneous teaching and views which concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; 2 Timothy 3:1-5 also implied in Rev. 2:14-16; Phil. 3:2-3, 15-19; Rom. 16:17-18).

The Process

The mechanism or process of church discipline occurs according to Matthew 18:15-18. In this passage Jesus states, ¹⁵“If your brother sins^o, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸“Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

Practically, this will mean that the vast majority of discipline in the church will occur as accountability by those who are closest to the person in need of discipline. This could be the spouse, family member, small group member, prayer partner, or mentor among others. Thus the first one to notice a pattern of behavior that scripture teaches is not found in the character of God, would be the one to personally deal with the offender and hopefully end the behavior early before it becomes a habit or stronghold. Thus the majority of these occasions will go unknown to all but God and the 2 involved.

If the offender does not listen, after prayerfully trying to change the behavior, then the restorer must get another involved. This should be someone of higher authority such as a small group leader, a deacon, or ministry leader. This new involvement should verify the offense and the approach the offender in love, grace, firmness, prayer and humility with the hope of restoration.

If the offender still does not listen, then it is time to take it to the church. At the Village Church of Barrington, by constitutional by-laws, this step is done by the elders as representatives of the church. It is done as part of the shepherding of the church. The elders will look into the matter by interviews and investigation. After interviewing all involved and praying together over the matter, if they find the concerns are valid, they will then ask the offender to repent of the sin at hand. They will also institute any necessary steps they feel will be appropriate to protect the body, and allow restoration of the offender to the body. This will include a written statement between the elders and the offender outlining the offender, the offense, the steps taken before coming to the elders and the steps necessary for full restoration to the body.

In the case of a pastor or elder, at least 2 witness will be needed to corroborate the allegations (1 Timothy 5:19-20). If the allegations are true, in the case of a pastor, elder, deacon or officer of the church, and any ministry leaders, this will involve removal from leadership. It may also

involve outside counsel in the case of pastors or elders. Pastors and elders will be held to a higher standard (James 3:1). For those pastors and elders continuing in sin, public rebuke will be required. However, for all other discipline matters, the elders will not publicly discuss cases of discipline.

The process towards expulsion will stop at any time if the offender repents and demonstrates fruits of that repentance. This will be evident by changed behavior which may include restitution to those wronged, seeking forgiveness of those offended, and appropriate mechanisms and safeguards to prevent reoccurrence of the offense. Each offender will be assigned an elder who will be their accountability contact to oversee the progress toward restoration. Each offender will be notified by written report periodically on the status of their discipline and restoration.

If after a period of time, the offender still will not listen to the counsel of the elders, and they continue in the sin, then they will be removed from membership and the congregation notified of the excommunication. The offender will be notified by certified mail, and will be warned about the scriptural implications of their removal from the body. Pertinent texts include 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, Titus 3:1-11, and Matthew 18:17. These texts tell us that keeping an unrepentant and rebellious member in the body can damage the whole body. They speak to expelling the offender, and use difficult terms like “handing over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” and “have nothing to do with them” and “treat them like a pagan or tax collector” All these terms tell us that the protection of the body is removed from the offender, and the remaining body is not to fellowship with the offender. This does not mean they stop reaching out to the offender, but that normal fellowship is broken.

Because of the detailed and prolonged nature of the discipline process, and the private details reviewed by the elders, the constitution of The Village Church of Barrington states that the Elders have final authority in the Church for matters of discipline. Thus no discipline case will be discussed at a congregational level. The congregation will only be notified of an expulsion so they may break fellowship, pray for the lost sheep and seek restoration.

The attitude of the body is to pray for that outcast, that they will return to Christ and seek repentance. James 5:19-20 states, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” Galatians 6:1 tells us that the purpose of the discipline is to hopefully restore the repentant offender.

2 Corinthians 2:5-10 describes the process. Once the wayward sheep repents and comes back to the fold, he is to be forgiven and welcomed with love and restored to the fellowship. This should be a congregational welcome, just as the expulsion was.

In summary, although it is a difficult and trying responsibility, and one that our culture would not recognize or adhere to, the Elders of the Village Church desire to obey scripture and carry out discipline of the members for the health of the body, the restoration of the offended, and ultimately for the Glory of God.

